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AUTHOR Coyle-Williams, Maureen
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ABSTRACT

This document identifies the costs of teen pregnancy in terms of high dropout rates, long-term educational decrements, the increased risks of the children of teen parents, loss of human capital, and increased welfare costs. Prevention and intervention and the features of operationally successful program models are included under the topic of enhancing the employability of teen parents. Components of operationally successful programs were identified as comprehensiveness, support services, warm program atmosphere, structured peer support groups, individualization, flexible program scheduling, long-term follow-up services, staffing, holistic approach, case management, and funding diversification. Program deficiencies and gaps in service provision are identified as problems with current programs for teen parents. The concluding recommendation is that high quality vocational programming must be included as part of a comprehensive programming effort for teen parents. A 16-item reference list is included. (CML)

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TASPP BRIEF

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IMPROVING THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF TEEN PARENTS

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High Dropout Rates

Long-Term Educational Decrements

Increased Risks of the Children of Teen Parents

Teen mothers represent a large sub-group of the single parent population in this country. Each year nearly one-half million teenage women give birth (U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1986). An increasing number of these youth are unmarried and a significant number have already given birth at least once (Children's Defense Fund [CDF], 1988; McGee, 1985). Unfortunately, many are ill-prepared for meeting the demands of single parenthood. In addition to their education deficits and their youth, many are poor and have inadequate basic academic skills CDF (1986a) reports that:

- Teens with poor basic skills are five times as likely to become mothers before age sixteen as are those with average basic skills.
- Young women with poor or fair basic skills are four times as likely as those with average basic skills to have more than one child in their teens.

Clearly, many of these youth will need assistance if they are to become economically self-sufficient and able to facilitate the normal and healthy development of their children. This BRIEF focuses on the need for vocational education for teen parents. The public and private costs of teen parenting and the features of successful program models are highlighted. Finally, the current status of programming for teen parents is overviewed.

Costs of Teen Pregnancy

Teenaged parents, their children, and society as a whole suffer the consequences of early parenthood. For teen mothers the costs can be quite high. Pregnancy and parenthood are a major cause of dropping out of school among teenage girls. According to CDF (1987):

- Each year, at least 40,000 teenage girls drop out of school because of pregnancy.
- Of all the teens who had babies in 1983, 61% had not completed high school, almost 20% had not completed ninth grade.

The consequences of early childbearing are long lasting. A large percentage of teen parents never catch up with their peers. In a review of the research examining the impact of early childbirth on the educational attainment of teen mothers, Hayes (1987) reports the following:

- Only 50-60% of all adolescent girls who become mothers ever finish high school.
- Young women who give birth while they are in junior high school or high school complete on average fewer years of school, are less likely to earn a high school diploma, and are less likely to go on to college and graduate study than those who delay childbearing until their twenties.
- The younger the mother at the time of the birth, the greater the educational decrement.

The adverse effects of early parenthood are also evident in the children of teenage mothers. These children face increased risks of physical, social, emotional, and academic difficulties (Quint & Guy, 1989). In addition, research suggests that they may be more likely to become adolescent parents themselves than are the children of older mothers (Hayes, 1987).

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Loss of Human Capital

While teen parenthood can be damaging to both teens and their children, the public also pays a high price. In addition to the loss in human capital at a time when this country is facing shortages in the skilled entry level workforce (Johnston & Packer, 1987), the welfare costs associated with teen parents are substantial. As a group, teen mothers tend to be poor and dependent on public assistance for economic support (Hayes, 1987). Births to teens cost the public an estimated \$1.3 billion per year. All teen parents (not just those who gave birth during the year) cost \$2.7 billion annually (CDF, 1987).

Increased Welfare Costs

Over half of all AFDC expenditures go to households in which the mother was a teenager when her first child was born (Quint & Guy, 1989).

Enhancing the Employability of Teen Parents

Prevention and Intervention

Recent efforts have focused on decreasing the negative consequences of teen pregnancy and parenthood (CDF, 1987; Polit, 1986; McGee, 1985; U.S. Department of Labor, 1987; Quint & Guy, 1989). While there is no one solution, programs to prevent unintended adolescent pregnancy as well as programs to enhance the self-sufficiency of teen parents are considered necessary (CDF, 1986b; Hayes, 1987). The Ford Foundation Project on Social Welfare and the American Future (1989) has recommended such a two pronged approach:

It is vitally important to develop a two-part strategy. The first part would encourage teenagers not to become pregnant. The second would help teenagers who do become parents to return to school while learning how to be good parents and providers. Programs featuring services to teenage mothers—ranging from counseling on nutrition and health to day-care services in the public schools—need to be designed to help avoid welfare dependency and keep young mothers in the mainstream of society. (p. 45)

Features of Operationally Successful Program Models

In examining program models for **providing teen parents with vocational and employment-related services**, Polit (1986) identified the following components of operationally successful programs:

- **Comprehensiveness** (e.g., educational, vocational, social, and health services)
- **Support Services** (e.g., on-site day care and transportation assistance)
- **Warm Program Atmosphere** (e.g., a caring, family-like environment)
- **Structured Peer Support Groups**
- **Individualization**
- **Flexible Program Scheduling** (e.g., open-enrollment and open-exit format and operating on a less than full-time basis)
- **Long-Term Follow-up Services** (e.g., on-going assistance for months and sometimes years in the form of information, referral, checking on new needs, and providing additional support)
- **Staffing** (e.g., emphasis on hiring sensitive, caring, non-judgmental staff who enjoy working with teenagers)
- **Holistic Approach** (e.g., services to teen's family members and partners)
- **Case Management** (e.g., ensuring that each teen has access to needed services)
- **Funding Diversification** (e.g., an array of funding arrangements from local, state, and federal government as well as private sources)

Employment related components that could help teen parents to become more self-sufficient include the following: career awareness and counseling, job readiness, work experience, job search assistance, skills training, job placement, and basic skills training. Comprehensive programs which include a vocational component have been described elsewhere (Polit, 1986).

New Chance Model

A new initiative developed by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), known as New Chance is among the most recent of these efforts (Quint & Guy, 1989). This program offers intensive, comprehensive, long-term services to

young mothers, 17 to 21 years old, who are high school dropouts and welfare recipients. Having been pilot tested, New Chance is currently being implemented at seventeen selected demonstration sites in ten states. MDRC will be conducting an evaluation of the New Chance model that includes implementation, impact, and benefit cost studies. The demonstration is anticipated to produce reliable information concerning the effectiveness of the program's comprehensive approach in helping participants to achieve the following objectives: increased educational and vocational skill levels and ability to secure stable employment; fertility control; decreased dependence on public assistance and escape from poverty; increased self-esteem and self-confidence; improved parenting, communication, and other life management skills; and improved cognitive, emotional, and physical development of their children (MDRC, 1990).

Problems with Current Programs for Teen Parents

Program Deficiencies

While it is generally agreed that teen parents need comprehensive, coordinated, and individualized services in order to achieve self-sufficiency, making such services available to all the youth who need them has been a problem. Research indicates that the response of most schools across the country to the needs of pregnant and parenting teens has been limited. Deficiencies in services which impair program effectiveness include: insufficient availability of comprehensive programs (employment preparation and job placement are especially weak), inappropriately narrow service focus (job training and day care are often neglected), and failure to reach all of those who could benefit from services (especially the neediest young women) (Ascher, 1985).

Gaps in Service Provision

Even where such "comprehensive" programs exist, there are likely to remain sizable gaps in the range of services offered and the proportion of the potentially eligible population served. In a study examining the development and maintenance of comprehensive programs for pregnant and parenting adolescents, Weatherley, Perlman, Levine, and Klerman (1985) found that it is extremely difficult for most local communities to put together and maintain comprehensive services for pregnant and parenting adolescents. They report that even the "very best" programs are limited to coordinating existing community services and only reach a portion of those who need services.

Recommendations

Policies Facilitating the Transition from Childhood to Adulthood

Weatherley et al., (1985) conclude that the difficulties inherent in implementing a comprehensive service model on a large scale basis limit its usefulness. They recommend that teen pregnancy and parenthood be addressed by a broad range of policies designed to facilitate the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The call for such large scale reform has been echoed on the National level. In a survey of State responses to teen pregnancy, the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (1986) found that, "...there is no focused approach to solving the complex problems of teen pregnancy at any level of government. The efforts that do exist are too few, uncoordinated, and lack significant support. In short, the system is broken." (p. ix)

Clearly, the solutions to the teen parenting "problem" are complex. **If the self-sufficiency and long-term outcomes of teen parents are to be improved, then quality vocational programming must be included as part of a comprehensive programming effort.** Unfortunately, vocational programming is not typically a component of programming efforts for teen parents (Wirt, Muraskin, Goodwin, & Meyer, 1989).

Include Quality Vocational Programming as Part of Comprehensive Programming

Those arguing in favor of expanding employment-related services to teen parents point out that such services may increase the self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and life-options of poor teens. Furthermore, employment-related service may help decrease unintended repeat pregnancies thereby helping to break the cycle of poverty associated with early parenting. While solutions to the teen pregnancy problem may be both complex and costly, the costs of long-term public support, lost human potential, and ongoing cycles of early childbearing may prove much greater.

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National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California, Berkeley

Developed by:

Technical Assistance for Special Populations Program (TASPP)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Site

Address all comments, questions, requests for additional copies to:
Dr. Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein, TASPP Director
345 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820 (217) 333-0807

This is the last in a series of TASPP BRIEFS highlighting research and resources addressing the benefits of vocational education for students at risk of dropping out of school, individuals with limited proficiency in English and teen parents. This BRIEF was prepared by Maureen Coyle-Williams, TASPP Resource Specialist.



National Center for Research in
Vocational Education
University of California, Berkeley

TASPP
345 Education Building
1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820

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